

JODI TAYLOR

International Bestseller

ROMAN HOLIDAY

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A SHORT STORY

Meet the disaster-magnets of St Mary's
as they hurtle around History ...

THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S

Roman Holiday

Another rollicking short story from the Chronicles of St Mary's.

Question: What sort of idiot installs his mistress in his wife's house? Especially when that mistress is Cleopatra VII Thea Philopator, Queen of Egypt and the most notorious woman of her time?

Answer: Julius Caesar – poised to become King of Rome. Or as good as.

Question: At this potentially sensitive point in your political manoeuvrings, who are the last people you'd want crashing through the door, observing, recording, documenting ...?

I think we all know the answer to that one.

Roman Holiday – an epic, stand alone tale set in Ancient Rome, 44 BC, featuring, in no particular order: an attempted murder, stampeding bullocks, Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile, a bowl of poisonous snakes, a smallish riot, Julius Caesar, and Mr Markham's wayward bosoms.

The word on the street was that we had a project on Cleopatra. Everyone was talking about it. This would be part of the Ancient Rome assignment and everyone wanted to be involved.

The bar was packed. I'm not sure why I mention that, because here at St Mary's, the bar is always packed.

We work for the Institute of Historical Research at St Mary's Priory. We investigate major historical events in contemporary time. You might as well call it time-travel. Everyone else does.

Anyway, the bar was packed. Everyone was discussing Cleopatra, including, regrettably, Dr Dowson, our librarian and archivist, and Professor Rapson, head of Research and Development, both of whom can seldom agree on the date, let alone anything else. The discussion followed its inevitable course and they were eventually separated by their respective departments and led away to opposite ends of the room.

Peterson and I, who knew all about the Cleopatra assignment and had already made our recommendations, resumed our interrupted discussion over whether it was possible to smuggle a baby into a birthing chamber concealed inside a warming pan. Chief Farrell, that still, small voice of calm in the insanity that is St Mary's, remarked that since St Mary's didn't actually possess a baby, it was, at the moment, impossible to be certain one way or the other. And yes, borrowing one without the owner's consent was, as they say, contra-

indicated. In the vigorous debate that followed, none of us saw Markham and Roberts exchange glances and slip quietly out of the bar.

I suspected something was going on. People fell mysteriously silent as I walked past. Or rushed around clutching imperfectly concealed bundles of something or other. Data stacks were hurriedly flattened when I entered a room. Both Peterson, my fellow historian and partner in crime, and Major Guthrie, the head of our hard-worked security section, reported similar incidents, but as Guthrie remarked, although he was certain St Mary's was up to something, behaviour here was so bizarre anyway, it was difficult to tell.

Three days later, Markham and Roberts unveiled their surprise.

They'd chosen their moment well. Almost everyone was assembled in the Great Hall, even our Director, Dr Bairstow, who had Clerk's and Van Owen's report on the unfortunate death of the MP William Huskisson under his arm, and was enquiring why there wasn't an historian in his unit who could spell the word amonaly. Anonoly. Amono – irregularity.

Since I was stumped for an answer to this one, I was, initially, quite pleased to have a distraction. A blast of static-laden recorded music resolved itself into a fanfare of trumpets, followed by a mighty roll of drums. Startled, I turned to see Mr Roberts, my youngest historian; standing on the half-landing, staggering slightly under the weight of a rolled carpet slung over one shoulder.

My first horrified thought was that he was naked and I hadn't had my lunch yet. A second glance, however, revealed a very inadequately secured loincloth. I gave private thanks to the god of historians that gravity seemed to have taken the day off. A magnificent torque, obviously made of tin foil, hung across his chest, and a thick, black wig swung around his face.

'Bloody hell,' said someone. 'Roberts is a eunuch.'

'No, I'm not,' he said, crossly. In what he fondly imagined was a deep and resonantly impressive voice, he squeaked, 'I am Robertis, body servant of the Egyptian queen, great Cleopatra, come to pay her respects to mighty Caesar and entreat his favour in choosing the personnel for the upcoming Cleopatra assignment of which, of course, we know absolutely nothing.'

He began, precariously, to make his way down the stairs towards a stunned Dr Bairstow – or mighty Caesar, as he should probably be known for the purposes of this tale.

He – Robertis, not mighty Caesar, obviously – was sweating profusely under the weight of the carpet hefted over his shoulder. I recognised it as the moth-eaten old thing from Wardrobe. I shot an

accusing glance at Mrs Enderby, who refused to catch my eye.

He so nearly made it. He was only two steps from safety when his legs buckled. He fell to his knees, clutching at his loincloth, whose fastenings had, as predicted, proved unequal to their task. The carpet slipped from his shoulder, hit the oak stairs with considerable impact, and fell down into the Hall, unrolling as it went, to deposit Cleopatra, or Mr Markham as he's sometimes known, at the feet of mighty Caesar.

I should state now: kids, don't try this at home, because it never happened. If you roll someone in a carpet then thirty seconds later, they're unconscious through lack of oxygen. Or heatstroke. Or whiffy on carpet-cleaning fluid fumes. Trust me – I'm an historian.

I know that in the film, an immaculate Cleopatra lies appealingly on a priceless oriental rug, batting kohled eyelashes before seducing the most powerful man in the known world, but our Mr Markham, lying semi-conscious and drenched in sweat, hadn't quite pulled it off.

You had to hand it to him though, he'd made a real effort.

All right, at some point, his wig had come off and was now glued to his sweaty face like one of those creatures from *Alien*, but hairier. His historically inaccurate diaphanous trousers had come horribly adrift, giving anyone who cared to look a first-class view of his Homer Simpson underpants. But it was his bosoms that were the star of the show.

God knew where he'd got the bra from. One of Nurse Hunter's, presumably. I hoped she hadn't been wearing it at the time, although with Markham, you never knew. She wouldn't want it back anyway, covered as it now was in sequins and glitter, and festooned with Christmas tinsel.

He'd obviously taken time and trouble over the composition of his bosoms, discarding the traditional favourites of rugby socks, tissues, or oranges, in favour of two half-lemons, which, as he later unacceptably explained to an unmoved and unmoving Dr Bairstow, were just brilliant for that authentic nipple-look, sir.

That, however, was for later. At the moment, he was lying in a less-than-alluring heap, purple-faced and gasping for breath, covered in an unbelievable amount of greyish carpet fluff which had adhered itself to every available inch of sweaty, naked skin and showed no signs of letting go.

You want to look away, but you just can't do it. Even as I watched, one of his bosoms, obviously dislodged by the impact, fell from its holster and rolled gently across the floor, until Dr Bairstow stopped it with his foot.

Silence fell.

St Mary's held its breath.

Even Robertis seemed rooted to the spot.

Mr Markham, however, was made of stern stuff.

He raised himself on one elbow, reached out a trembling hand, and exclaimed blearily, 'Will you look at that. Some plonker is standing on my bosom.'

'Yes,' said Dr Bairstow, icily. 'That would be me.'

And even as Retribution reached out for him, Markham had to have the last word.

'You're doing it beautifully, sir.'

And wisely passed out.

I think it must have been this unnerving manifestation of St Mary's collective boredom that prompted Dr Bairstow to move the schedule along a little. A few days later, Peterson and I were called to his office, handed the familiar file folders, and told to get on with it. And to take Mr Markham with us. I didn't enquire, but I definitely got the impression that bringing him back was a bit of an optional extra.

Chief Farrell performed his usual miracles, announced Pod Three was fit for purpose, and that it was a shame the same couldn't be said of the crew.

I held a mini-briefing in my office. Present were Peterson and Van Owen, representing the History department. Major Guthrie and Markham represented – they said – the more stable element at St Mary's, which came as a complete surprise to everyone else because we never knew we had one. Mrs Enderby from Wardrobe was there to advise on costume and coach us on the wearing thereof, and Professor Rapson and Dr Dowson prepared to argue each other to death in the interests of historical accuracy.

'Good morning,' I said. 'Thank you all for coming. This is the first stage of our Ancient Rome assignment and it's a good one. I'm sure it won't come as a complete surprise to anyone. Caesar and Cleopatra. 44 BC. Ancient Rome.'

A stir of anticipation ran around the room. Scratchpads were opened up and we got stuck in.

'In another of his moves to become, effectively, the sole ruler of the Roman Empire, Gaius Julius Caesar has invited his bit on the side, Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, to stay with him Rome. He's the coming man. He's a cocky self-publicist. He's arrogant and insensitive. He's installed his mistress – that's Cleopatra, as so vividly brought to life by Mr Markham just recently – in his own home. His wife, Calpurnia, who, famously, is above reproach, is still in residence, so only the gods know what his home life must be like at the moment.

'It doesn't matter much, however, because we're only six weeks or

so away from the infamous Ides of March which is when he gets his comeuppance. Twenty-three times, actually, just as he's poised to take the final step to absolute power. Cleopatra will flee to Egypt, taking her son Caesarion with her. Later, she'll shack up with Mark Anthony, lose the Battle of Actium, and commit suicide with the probably unwilling participation of an asp or two.

'We won't be around for that, however. Our assignment is simply to observe the crucial run up to his assassination, gauge the mood of the people, and, if possible, catch a glimpse of the fabled Queen of the Nile.'

'And return to St Mary's, unscathed,' muttered Guthrie.

'Yes. And that, of course,' I said quickly, glossing over the fact that sometimes, that doesn't always happen. Quite rarely happens, actually. All right – not at all. However, there's always a first time and we live in hope.

'We intend to locate Caesar's villa, apparently just outside of Rome, in the Transtiberina area. You all have maps – please familiarise yourselves with the layout of the city.

'Now, I'll be going in as a Roman matron of impeccable antecedents. Roman society is heavily patriarchal, but a well-dressed lady, accompanied by an impressive retinue, will command immense respect. Sadly, however, instead of an impressive retinue, my escort will consist of Dr Peterson and Miss Van Owen, with Major Guthrie and Mr Markham to keep us safe.'

A word about Roman names would perhaps be useful at this point. Roman men typically have three names: their personal name, their tribal name, and their family name, which is the equivalent of a surname. Hence, with Gaius Julius Caesar, Gaius is his first name, Julius is his tribal name – he belongs to the Julian tribe – and Caesar is his family name. Women have only two names. They're named for their tribe – hence Julius Caesar's daughter would be named Julia. I was Rupilia Euphemia – a name that, as well as sounding like a musical vegetable, simply oozed impeccable lineage. Van Owen was Sempronia Tertulla. Her protests had been ignored. Peterson as (nominal) head of the household rejoiced in Decimus Aelius Sura. The security section, being well below the salt, was making do with just one name apiece. Major Guthrie was Otho and Markham was Pullus. He'd already commented that since he appeared to have only one name at St Mary's, it was appropriate that he should have only one name here, as well. Major Guthrie, as usual, had nothing to say.

Dr Dowson stirred. 'I think most of you already speak Latin, but I've put together an Idiot's Guide for refresher purposes, plus, I'm available for private conjugation should anyone feel the need.'

Markham blinked. 'Is that even

legal?’

I fixed them all with a stern eye. ‘Roman society sets great store by respectability and so it goes without saying that we will all be on our best behaviour.’

There was a bit of a dubious silence.

Mrs Enderby pulled her scratchpad towards her, smiled sweetly at Markham, and enquired brightly whether he would be togate.

‘Certainly not,’ he said with great dignity. ‘Church of England.’

Mrs Enderby took a great deal of time and trouble over our wardrobe. Peterson wore a thick cream tunic, heavily embroidered with a gold key pattern around the neckline and hem. He was also issued a piece of fabric about the same general size and weight as the county of Rushfordshire.

‘Your toga,’ announced Mrs Enderby a little breathlessly, depositing this thickly folded garment in his outstretched arms. He sagged a little. ‘You’ll need to practise the folds. Make sure you drape it over the correct arm.’

Muttering, he was led away for toga lessons.

Van Owen and I, as highborn Roman women, would wear elegantly draped tunics of pale green and pale blue respectively, ostensibly fastened with golden fibulae, but actually sewn firmly together for safety. As a married woman, I wore a coloured stola over the top of that, and we would both be wrapped in an all-encompassing palla to shield us from prying eyes. As with Peterson, there was a huge amount of fabric to manage. The palla should be draped over your left shoulder, around the back, under your right arm, and then back across the front of the body and carried over the left arm. Try it with a bed sheet sometime. Which is what we spent hours doing, practising climbing up and down stairs, getting through doors without mishap, and walking elegantly without falling flat on our faces.

Markham and Guthrie wore simple tunics and heavy-duty boots. I knew they would both be armed, but Roman tunics finish at knee level, so I really didn’t want to speculate as to where they would be keeping their weapons.

We assembled outside Pod Three and gave each other the once-over for wristwatches, recently acquired tattoos, and the like. A crowd of people hung over the gallery, clapping and cheering.

We filed into the pod. Peterson and Leon Farrell checked over the co-ordinates, while the rest of us stowed our gear.

‘Good luck, everyone,’ said Leon. He smiled at me and shook my hand as he always did when others were present. His hand was very warm and strong. I took a moment to smile back. Everyone else

looked at the ceiling, the floor, their feet, whatever. Then he was gone.

Peterson closed the door behind him, checked the console one last time, and looked at me for confirmation.

‘In your own time, Dr Peterson.’

And the world went white.

We landed on the northern side of a small square, which was surrounded by blank brick walls. The early morning sun cast long purple shadows across the dust. It would be warm later on, but at this time of year there was still a bit of a nip in the air. Early though it was, a few market traders were assembling, setting up their stalls and generally bustling around. No one paid us any attention.

Guthrie, Markham, and Peterson disappeared to hire a carrying-chair. No respectable Roman lady walked the streets. Since they were men, this simple task would take at least three of them. Peterson to do the talking, Guthrie to loom menacingly during the financial negotiations, and Markham to get himself into trouble.

Van Owen and I made ourselves a cup of tea, put our fashionably shod feet up on the console, and patiently awaited events.

They returned about an hour or so later with a huge, cumbersome, old-fashioned wooden affair. To keep the weight down, the sides weren't solid, but swathed in yards of faded dark red fabric, slightly worn through in parts. It looked like a recent reject from a gentleman's establishment (maybe his mother had died) and as such was perfect for our purpose. This was exactly the sort of conveyance in which a Roman matron would have herself carried around town. The four chairmen looked reasonably hale and hearty and, most importantly, sober.

We climbed awkwardly inside. We can research and practise and prepare until we're blue in the face, but the fact remains – we never quite fit in. We're amonolous – anony – out of our own time – and in many small ways it always shows.

However, we were in and reasonably comfortable. We pulled the curtains closed to preserve our modesty and Peterson instructed the chairmen to take us to the residence of Gaius Julius Caesar. The chair was a doubly good idea, not only giving credence to our story, but also taking us directly to our destination without us having to spend hours asking around and wandering the streets of Rome.

The chairmen lifted the chair almost simultaneously – presumably it was too early in the morning for them to be properly drunk – and with only a couple of lurches, we set off.

I swear, I could have crawled there more quickly. On one leg. Blindfolded. Or maybe they were taking us there via Carthage. I

would have suspected they were padding their fee, but the streets were steep, rough, and increasingly crowded. The sun climbed higher. What would be a pleasant day to spend lolling in the shade of a fig tree, drinking wine and bullying your slaves, would be nowhere near as pleasant for the four sweating chairman of the apocalypse. I personally would want to deliver my passengers as quickly as possible, collect my fee, and stagger into the nearest caupona to recover.

The truth was that Rome was a busy place and we moved a snail's pace because of it. Our colleagues outside might have had to walk, but at least they could freely look around. Van Owen and I, bundled up inside our cloth-covered sweatbox, had to content ourselves with peering occasionally through a chink in the curtains and trying not to suffocate in the musty, hot gloom.

Eventually, however, after seemingly endless lurching, we arrived. Either that or one or more of our carriers had passed out. However, there was no shouting or screaming – always a good sign – and the chair was lowered to the ground with only a slight bump. Van Owen sighed and straightened her tiara – again.

I pulled my palla around me as protection against the bright sunshine and the contaminating glances of the hoi polloi, and with as much dignity as we could muster, we disembarked.

Peterson paid the chairmen a small sum and instructed them to wait. Because we never meant to go in. As we all strove to make clear to Dr Bairstow in our subsequent reports – we never meant to go in, sir. We didn't think they'd let us in, even if we wanted to. Which we didn't. The plan was that we would stand around outside, mingling with those around us, identify those coming and going, hopefully catch a glimpse of mighty Caesar himself, judge the mood of the crowd, and return to the pod. Maybe doing it all again tomorrow until we had what we wanted. Honestly, Dr Bairstow, we never meant to go in.

I stood in the warm sunshine and under the guise of adjusting the graceful folds of my costume, took surreptitious stock of our surroundings. Guthrie and Markham were checking out the crowds – and crowds there were, milling around all over the street, hoping to gain entrance eventually and present their petitions. Van Owen and Peterson were listening to what was being said and trying to put names to faces, and I was scanning the property.

It looked a nice little piece of real estate. I saw a smallish villa with its entrance set back a little way between two flanking shops – a leather worker on one side and a wine-seller on the other. Given the rough nature of the neighbourhood – this was far from being the best address in town – Caesar's affection for his first wife and her property

must have been considerable.

The villa's wooden doors were thrown open as a gesture of hospitality, but two enormous, shaven-headed, surly-looking door wardens sat at each side, arms folded, ready to deal with potential trouble-makers. They were big and they were solid and looked about as light-hearted as scrofula.

I knew the property had come to Caesar through his first wife, Cornelia Cinna. By all accounts, she was the love of his life. He married again after her death – in fact, his current wife, Calpurnia Pisonis was his third, but he'd never left this villa, bringing all his wives here. Not simultaneously, obviously. And now, obviously not a man who knew when to stop, he'd installed his mistress as well.

I felt a certain sympathy for Calpurnia Pisonis, living in the shadow of the first wife and now having to share her home with the most flamboyant and famous woman in the ancient world. Every man has a mistress, but they're usually installed in a discreet set of rooms in a discreet part of town. He does not brazenly hold court with her as all Rome traipses in and out, ostensibly to pay their respects, but in reality, of course, to have a good gawk, suss out what's going on, and report back to their wives. Which, admittedly was exactly why we were here as well, but we were carrying out important historical research, not just being nosey. An important distinction. However, as is so often the case with St Mary's, events were about to spiral out of our control.

Because we never meant to go in ...

We stood in a tight little group, causing no trouble at all and not attracting attention in any way, when a body slipped out from behind the door wardens and approached us. We agreed afterwards that it was probably because we had women in our party – the throng outside were exclusively male. And, quite honestly, if you didn't know us, you would have agreed we were the last word in Roman respectability.

Seeing a man draw near, I stepped behind Peterson. Never speak if you can get a man to do it for you. It also serves as a useful basis for recriminations afterwards when it all goes pear-shaped.

Anyway, he was a shortish man and stockily built. Greek I suspected, especially with that beard. He carried a tablet and stylus and I decided he was a secretary, as many Greek slaves often are.

He was enquiring, quite civilly, as to our business this morning. Peterson took a chance.

'I am Decimus Aelius Sura. This is Rupilia Euphemia. We have recently returned to Rome from the country and wish to pay our respects to the lady of the house, Calpurnia Pisonis. However, should this not be convenient, we can call another day.'

Plainly not expecting to be granted access, he was already stepping backwards, but the Greek had other ideas. He spoke briefly and gestured towards the open doorway. Apparently, we were being invited to step inside to pay our respects to the lady of the house, and which lady of the house that would be remained to be seen.

‘Exciting, isn’t it?’ said Peterson, softly, offering me his arm as we were escorted past the door wardens, neither of whom looked particularly impressed by us. Scylla on one hand and Charybdis on the other.

Van Owen fell in quietly behind me and Guthrie and Markham brought up the rear. I made sure to walk slowly, leaning heavily on an ebony cane that could so easily become a weapon, should the need arise.

We advanced with dignity through the vestibule and paused in the entrance to the atrium. I remembered I was a highborn Roman matriarch and didn’t gape, but it was a close thing.

Appearances, as I am continually learning, can be deceptive. This small villa, so nondescript from the outside, was beautifully appointed and decorated with taste and style.

Ahead of me, the traditional small pool with fountain bubbled cheerfully, to cool and refresh during the hot summer months. Around the edges of the atrium, doors opened into small offices – *alae* – in which I could see clerks and scribes bustling back and forth. Caesar was an important man – soon to be even more important if his plans succeeded (which they wouldn’t), and his clerical infrastructure was already in place.

A small shrine venerating the household gods stood in a niche on the right-hand wall. Frescos of running lions decorated the walls. The paint looked fresh. I wondered if these decorations dated from his first wife’s time and were simply renewed every couple of years.

The place was packed. Groups of men stood around, discussing politics, finance, and their favoured chariot teams: all the things men talk about. You could easily substitute football for gladiators and business suits for togas: nothing changes.

With a polite murmur, our guide disappeared. I squinted at the floor mosaics, trying to trace a line of superb leaping dolphins around the outside of the floor and then craned my neck to admire the view through the atrium across to the peristyle garden. Even this was crowded, with more groups of men sitting on benches and standing on flowerbeds, crushing the delicate plants even before they had time to flower.

I wondered how Calpurnia felt about this invasion of her privacy. Her house, the traditional setting for a Roman woman, was certainly no longer her home. The foreign woman had seen to that. Left to

herself she might well have been happy playing hostess to her famous husband's parties, running his affairs during his long absences, working quietly behind the scenes for his good. This was a matron's accepted role, but now he stood, one foot poised, ready to rule the known world as Dictator Perpetuo of Rome. A king in everything but name. However, a king needs a queen and she must surely know that that queen would never be her. How did she feel?

I was about to find out.

The Greek was returning and he was not alone.

'Bloody hell,' whispered Peterson. 'Talk about stepping into the lions' den.'

He was right. Dr Bairstow was going to go ballistic. Except for one or two notable exceptions, we usually try to keep our heads down. We don't mix with the great and good. We linger discreetly in the background, observing, documenting, and surviving.

On the other hand, no one here was armed. The gathering was purely social with everyone busy eating and drinking at their host's expense. Caesar wasn't here. Cleopatra wasn't here. We'd meet Calpurnia, compliment her on her lovely home, and withdraw. What could go wrong?

Where to begin?

Calpurnia Pisonis was very much younger than I'd expected. On the other hand, everyone is beginning to look young to me. She wore a beautiful peplos in a warm dove colour, embroidered with birds and flowers. The colour suited her perfectly, complementing her grey eyes and light brown hair. In fact, the word soft could have been invented just to describe her. Soft hair, soft eyes, soft lips, soft colouring. She stood before us, smiling gently, her head tilted to one side as her Greek secretary whispered our names behind her.

'Rupilia Euphemia! I heard you had returned to Rome after your stay in the country. How pleasant to see you again.'

I inclined my head graciously. She couldn't possibly know me. Was she just exercising her undoubted social skills? I suspected something else. I suspected she was very fed up with being ignored in her own home. None of these people here today were anything to do with her. But now, suddenly, here we were, unexceptional guests of impeccable lineage who had called to see her – Calpurnia Pisonis – a person in her own right.

I couldn't blame her. She had ten or fifteen men trampling her garden, twice that number cluttering up the atrium, ten times that number besieging her front door, and her household slaves were going frantic trying to serve refreshments to everyone ... I was suddenly thoughtful, but that was for later. Concentrate on the now.

And concentrate we did, because before I could say a word, two enormous black men, oiled, glistening, and clad in leopard skins, strode into the atrium and took up a position in the tablinum – the open office area between the atrium and the garden. Another two Nubians transported a huge golden chair. No – not a chair – a throne. If the over-ornate and tasteless decorations themselves weren't a big enough clue, then the carved arms representing golden sphinxes gave the game away. The cushions were of gold and Egyptian lapis lazuli blue. There were a lot of them and they were probably needed. I've never sat on a throne myself, but they all look hideously uncomfortable to me. I'm obviously not cut out to be a princess. Stick a pea in my bed and far from having a bruised princess, you'd just have a squashed pea.

All around us, voices died in mid sentence. Beside me, Peterson groped for my hand and squeezed. He was the calmest man I knew – not difficult at St Mary's where the word volatile doesn't even begin to describe most of us – and for him, this was the equivalent of screaming hysterics.

Cleopatra was coming!

Glancing at our hostess, I could see she was less than entranced at the imminent arrival of supposedly the most beautiful woman in the world, and this was where it all started to go wrong.

In my defence, I can only say that I'm an historian. And human. Probably in that order. I could have kept my attention on my hostess for just a little longer. I could have exchanged a few words with her, perhaps. It would have been the polite and respectful thing to do, but I didn't.

I craned my neck to see Cleopatra's entrance. Just as everyone else was doing. I even took a few steps to one side of a better view. Then, too late, I remembered Calpurnia Pisonis and looked around. She was gone. I forgot her immediately.

I've always been in two minds about Cleopatra VII Thea Philopator. My first thought was – bloody hell, she's ugly!

Because she was. Her nose was out of all proportion to the rest of her face. I spared a thought for her son, Caesarion. By all accounts, Caesar had an enormous konk as well. The poor little kid probably had more nose than the rest of Egypt and Rome put together. I had a sudden vision of him being towed around the ancient world behind this immense nasal feature.

For God's sake, Maxwell. Focus!

My second thought was that you didn't notice how ugly she was. Cleopatra had 'it'. Whatever 'it' was, she had it in spades. She had more 'it' than the undoubtedly much prettier Calpurnia had or ever would have in her entire life.

After the shock of the nose, I was able to focus on her other features. She wore an elaborate wig, as did all Egyptian women, but I suspected her original hair was dark anyway. Neither did she possess milk-white skin for which she was famed – and at this point I should probably mention that Professor Rapson had done considerable research on how many asses needed to be milked for just one bath and had sent me a report claiming it would have taken a herd of between five hundred and seven hundred lady donkeys to provide enough milk for a daily bath. What he expected me to do with this information was never entirely clear, but his attempt to requisition said donkeys for further research was firmly rejected by Dr Bairstow. But whether she wallowed in whey or not, Cleopatra's skin remained obstinately olive.

To remedy this, her face was covered in white makeup, emphasising the beautifully shaped but thick eyebrows that gave her face even more character. I suspected she kept the eyebrows to counter-balance the nose. Her eyes, so heavy-lidded as to be almost reptilian, were thickly outlined in kohl. Green eye shadow matched her eye colour and her lips, in contrast to Calpurnia's, were full and a deep, dark crimson.

This was not a face to be forgotten. I'd never seen one like it before and I've not seen one like it since either. This was a face marked by Destiny. For good or ill, this was the face of a woman who would always be in control – who would take that Destiny and twist it to suit her own requirements. Maybe twist it until it snapped ...

I pulled myself together and tried to concentrate. I wasn't the only one. Everyone present stared, their mouths hanging open.

Accompanied by some half-dozen handmaidens – what do handmaidens do? I asked Peterson once and he just laughed and said the clue was in the word 'hand' – she paraded slowly around the atrium.

She was not wearing the white linen with which we always associate Egyptians. Perhaps it still wasn't warm enough. She wore a long, golden gown of some kind of shimmering silk that trailed along the ground behind her. A blue and gold torque hung around her neck. Gold bracelets climbed her forearms, and on her head she wore the golden uraeus of Egypt. Just in case we'd forgotten she was a queen.

She reached her throne, turned, and faced the room. You could have heard a pin drop. For what was she waiting?

And then it happened. First one, and then another, and then a small group, and then everyone, because no one wanted to be the last ... In a room full of Romans, republicans to a man, they bowed their heads.

I would never have believed it if I hadn't been there. They bowed

their heads. Caesar had chosen his queen well.

She allowed a small, triumphant smile to cross her face, and then, abruptly, she sat. Her dress settled in golden pools around her bare feet.

A sigh ran around the room.

I caught Van Owen's eye and she gestured at our menfolk, every single one of whom was staring, transfixed. She rolled her eyes.

It was too much to hope we would be presented. In fact, we should leave. The presence of royalty meant the presence of soldiers and our superficial disguise would never stand up to close investigation. The sensible thing to do would be to depart. Immediately.

Therefore, we stayed. Actually, I don't think wild horses could have dragged us out of that room. We're historians. When it comes to sensible thinking, someone else has to do the heavy lifting.

In our defence, we would have stayed quietly at the back, preferably somewhere near the side entrance in case we had to make a quick getaway. We were just beginning to ooze our way unobtrusively in that direction, when Calpurnia Pisonis reappeared.

She made a signal and immediately the house slaves began to scoop up the used beakers and dishes and to lay out new refreshments. This time, the platters were of gold and silver. She stood unobtrusively in the corner, quietly directing operations. As yet, the Egyptian queen had beckoned no one forward, talking instead only to members of her own household.

Calpurnia Pisonis approached the throne, inclined her head briefly – respectful but not obsequious – and spoke. An elderly Egyptian secretary translated, although I suspected Cleopatra spoke Latin as well as Calpurnia herself.

Having received a brief nod of assent, Calpurnia Pisonis beckoned to us. Oh my God, we were about to be presented to Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt.

It was Peterson who pulled himself together first. I knew I'd brought him along for a good reason.

He extended his arm to provide me with some much-needed support. We slowly skirted the pretty pool – I remember how loud the splashing water sounded in the sudden silence – and we presented ourselves to the glittering figure seated on the glittering throne.

Everyone regarded everyone else in complete silence. The Nubians stared over our heads. The handmaidens fiddled with their bracelets, bored. Cleopatra swept us with one brief look, which told her everything she needed to know about us, and turned her attention to her hostess.

Calpurnia's voice sounded clearly. I notice she did not address Cleopatra directly, thus obviating the need for any formal address.

‘I beg leave to present Decimus Aelius Sura,’ and she melted away.

Peterson stepped forward, placed his hand on his heart, and nodded. A nice blend of formal and informal. Nice one, Tim. No Roman would kneel to a non-Roman, queen or not.

He half turned and opened his mouth to introduce Van Owen and me, but never got that far. There was a sudden commotion at the door and the room was suddenly full of soldiers.

I just had time to think, ‘Shit! Busted!’, when Caesar himself marched into the room. I could hardly believe our luck. What a great day this was turning out to be.

Or not.

The effect on everyone was dramatic. The Egyptian queen immediately lost all interest in us, gazing expectantly over our shoulders as Caesar strode through the crowd, pausing to exchange greetings and forearm clasps with carefully selected people of influence, working the room like a modern politician. Ignoring his wife completely, he made a formal greeting to Cleopatra, who responded in kind.

And yes, he too had the most enormous nose, jutting from his face like a beak.

‘Bloody hell,’ whispered Markham, behind me. ‘Imagine if they both sneezed simultaneously. It would be like a twenty-one gun nasal salute.’

Caesar wasn’t a tall man and I don’t think he was as old as he looked. He had a sickly, yellow look that aged him prematurely. His hair was thin and greying and deep lines ran from his nose to the corner of his mouth. But he was a powerhouse. Energy radiated off him in waves. His presence in the room changed everything within it.

A chair was brought for him. Not a throne, just a simple wooden affair, but several inches higher than Cleopatra’s. I imagined their respective households sitting together, thrashing out these compromises.

He seated himself, pulling the folds of his purple toga around him as if he was cold. His short-sleeved tunic was of soft wool – understated, but of the finest quality.

His wife nodded her head and two slaves rushed forward with a marble-topped, claw-legged table. Another two began to lay out wine and snacks. The centrepiece was a great golden bowl of figs, drizzled with honey for extra sweetness. A true delicacy at this time of year.

We had been completely forgotten. Not unthankfully, we began to ease ourselves backwards, and we would have made it, too. We would have slipped away, climbed into our wooden edifice, been carried back to our pod, jumped away, and a large part of History might have been disastrously different.

But it wasn't; for which we have Markham to thank, and that's not a phrase that is often bandied around.

Caesar served the queen with wine and offered her the bowl of figs.

I remember it all very clearly – a frozen moment in time. Caesar holding the heavy bowl in both hands. Cleopatra, bracelets chinking, smiling up at him, and reaching gracefully to take a fig. And just as her hand hovered, just as she was making her choice, I heard a shout of warning; something thrust me violently to one side and Peterson to another. Markham lunged forwards and struck the bowl from Caesar's hands.

Figs flew through the air, flicking honey over everyone nearby.

And then everything speeded up again.

People shouted in anger. And fear. And confusion.

Two Nubians sprang forwards in one smoothly co-ordinated movement and formed an impenetrable barrier between the queen and us.

Not to be outdone, half a dozen Roman soldiers seized Guthrie and Peterson, but, thank God, hesitated before doing the same to Van Owen and me. Markham, however, being neither female nor highborn, was hurled to the floor with a sword at his throat.

No one had any idea what was happening and I was terrified they would kill us first and ask questions later. I was particularly anxious that Markham should be kept alive so I could kill him myself later.

And then, amongst the spilled figs, something moved.

Without stopping to think – again – I brought my sandal down on a small but very indignant snake.

An asp.

Markham very wisely didn't try to speak – just signalling with his eyes. Two more snakes lay curled in the bottom of the bowl. Another was wriggling across the floor as fast as he could go, looking for cover, but not anything like fast enough because Guthrie pulled an arm free, seized my stick from me, and brought it down hard on the snake, instantly breaking its backbone. A substantial amount of snake blood and guts splattered across my pretty tunic. Mrs Enderby would be wanting a word with me. Again.

Another one was heading for the garden and freedom, but a quick-thinking slave brought a flagon down on its head, picked it up with a stick, and tossed it into the pool. I never saw what became of it afterwards.

A third Nubian had upended the bowl, trapping the two sleepier snakes beneath it. Their future looked nearly as bleak as ours did.

That we were suspects was very apparent.

Chaos cut in. Someone had attempted to assassinate either Caesar or Cleopatra or both of them. That it was deliberate, there could be

no doubt. Six snakes do not accidentally find themselves in a bowl of honeyed figs. It seemed a safe bet that everyone here knew everyone else. In fact, there was only one set of strangers in the room and they were the idiots from St Mary's who had chosen this one day of all others to observe Caesar and Cleopatra, and dropped themselves right in it.

I let everyone else mill about, exclaiming and speculating. I stared at the sad little pile of squashed snake under my sandal and then I lifted my eyes and found myself staring straight at Caesar's wife. Who stood quietly in the corner, as she always did. Unimportant. Unregarded. Unobserved. Unmoved.

As if she felt my gaze, she turned her head slightly. We exchanged looks and I knew.

Shouting men were stamping on already-dead snakes. Seeking to disassociate themselves from this shocking event, many more were stampeding towards the front doors. Scylla and Charybdis had disappeared and their place taken by a quartet of tough-looking soldiers. Another two guarded the side entrance. Calpurnia and I still stared at each other as if we were the only two people in the room. Which, at that moment, to all intents and purposes – we were.

She had attempted murder. But of whom? The hated foreign woman? Or the husband who had made her live in his first wife's house? Who had ordered her to give up her rooms to foreign guests? Who compelled her to serve his mistress? And when he became ruler of all the known world, he wouldn't want her any longer. He would want the woman who was already a queen. Who already had a son by him.

So which of them was the intended victim and did she even care?

I knew what she'd done and she knew I knew. We were in a very great deal of trouble here. I'm not sure whether she had deliberately sought to implicate us. That had not been her original plan, I was sure of it, but the sudden appearance of a bunch of strangers who might not be what they appeared to be ... she had given instructions we were to be admitted. She had presented us to the queen to put us in the front line. Never mind that we'd had no opportunity. No one would care about that. As long as the blame didn't fall on them. Any minute now, Caesar's men would start taking names. Everyone present would be minutely examined. And not in a pleasant way. We'd given false names and an address that wouldn't stand up to any sort of close examination, let alone the stringent enquiries about to be made. The chances of us being allowed to depart were non-existent. We were in some very serious trouble. We would be arrested and taken away and once they split us up, there would be no hope of rescue. We'd be tortured and if we survived that, we'd be executed.

Or crucified. Or sent to the arena. We had to get out of here.

It had happened in one of two ways. She'd either spotted us as impostors and recognised an opportunity to implement her plan and place the blame on legitimate targets; or – and I felt badly about this – I'd insulted her and this was her revenge. She genuinely thought we'd come to visit her – that someone was actually paying her some attention – and then I'd looked away as Cleopatra entered the room. Just as everyone else had done. And the insult had been just one too many.

And suppose she'd succeeded. Suppose Cleopatra died before Caesar. What then? No Mark Anthony. No Battle of Actium ... No suicide by – ironically – asp bite.

And if Cleopatra had died today, what of Caesar? Suppose her death put him on his guard to such an extent that the assassination on the Ides of March either failed or never took place at all. Suppose Caesar was declared king of Rome. With his son Caesarion to succeed him. How much would that have changed History? The implications were breathtaking.

Were we meant to be here? To prevent a murder?

Possibly. And now it was a very good idea not to be here. But how we were to get out was anyone's guess. I didn't think we were under suspicion – yet. The little misunderstanding was being ironed out. Peterson was talking, his face calm and untroubled, and Markham was being pulled to his feet. But everyone in this room would be investigated and we needed to depart.

I caught Van Owen's eye. She nodded.

I gave a sudden, hoarse cry and clutched my chest.

'Quickly,' called Van Owen. 'Quickly. My aunt. Her heart. Please help her.'

They did.

I was supported to a chair. Wine was pressed upon me. On the grounds that I deserved it, I drank the lot. Believe me, there are huge advantages to living in a society that believes women are delicate and fragile creatures, unable to withstand even the smallest shock. I rolled my eyes, groaned, panted, clutched my chest and everything else I could think of. It was a powerful performance, if I do say so myself.

By now, Caesar had assumed control of the situation. He murmured briefly to Cleopatra who gracefully but swiftly left the atrium, surrounded by her retinue. He issued a series of crisp instructions and the excited gabble subsided. Finally, he approached Peterson and I could see the two of them discussing what best to do. If they offered me a room here then we were sunk.

Never once did he glance at his wife or express any concern for her

wellbeing. As far as I was concerned, the bastard deserved everything he got.

Peterson, however, was adamant I would be more comfortable in my own home.

‘Everyone knows where we live,’ he was declaring, confidently. ‘The Street of Six Vines behind the smaller Temple of Juno. Just ask for my house. Anyone can point it out.’

Never buy a used car from an historian.

He became confidential.

‘She often has these turns. They are getting worse. One day ...’ he paused, significantly. ‘She’s not getting any younger.’

And he wasn’t going to be getting any older. Directly we were safe, he was going to die. Slowly and painfully.

Caesar, however, appeared to have bought it. We were the people who’d foiled the plot, after all.

Someone was sent to organise our chair. Since no more wine appeared to be forthcoming, I allowed myself to be helped to my feet.

Our old-fashioned conveyance awaited, exuding enough respectability to satisfy anyone, together with a suddenly wide-awake set of chairmen. I suspected rumours were already flying around Rome.

Both Caesar and his wife attended our departure, she standing a little behind him, her face expressionless. I could not help a little shiver. Whether he was aware of something or not, Caesar turned around. For one long moment, he stared at his wife. The man was no fool. I wasn’t the only one who had suspicions that Caesar’s wife might not be as above reproach as she should be. But was she above being caught?

What would he do?

I said, ‘We need to go. Now,’ and moaned a little more, which gave Peterson a good reason for ordering them to get a move on. And move they did. I swear we broke into a canter at one point. The old chair creaked and swayed under the strain and Van Owen, who has a delicate stomach, turned the same colour as her dress.

I said to Van Owen, ‘Tell them to get a move on.’

She stuck her head out of the curtains and a second later, we moved up a gear.

We crossed the Tiber, muddy and swollen with winter rainfall, and finally, two streets away from the pod, we pulled over. We piled out and Peterson dismissed the chairmen. From the speed with which they disappeared, I suspected he’d massively over-tipped them, but should they subsequently be questioned, they could honestly say they dropped us in the middle of nowhere.

‘This way,’ said Guthrie, getting his bearings and nudging us down

a very unevenly paved street. We concentrated on not turning an ankle and Markham brought up the rear.

Nearly there.

We were just one hundred yards from the pod. Just one hundred yards, when we heard a shout behind us. Mindful of Major Guthrie's oft-repeated instructions, we kept going.

'Never mind what's happening behind you. You'll find out soon enough if you turn to look.'

Just about the first thing I learned at St Mary's.

We kept our heads. Van Owen and I scooped up our skirts and did the hundred-yard dash, sandals slapping on the uneven cobbles. Peterson ran with us. Markham and Guthrie covered our rear. Really, we'd done this sort of thing so many times we barely even stopped to think about it.

It would appear we had considerably underestimated Gaius Julius Caesar, conqueror of Gaul, Dictator Perpetuo, etc. etc. He knew very well what his wife had done. He also knew he could not publicly accuse her. He needed scapegoats. His soldiers had followed us at a discreet distance and when it became apparent we weren't heading for the Street of Six Vines, they'd decided to move in.

Fat lot of good it would do them. We scrambled inside and heaved a sigh of relief. We were safe inside the pod. They were outside the pod. We could just wait for them to give up and leave and then we could jump back to St Mary's when it got dark.

They didn't give up and they didn't leave. Of course they didn't. Roman soldiers were the best in the world, Caesar's men would be the best of the best, and these would be the handpicked best of the best of the best.

They pounded on the door, which didn't do them the slightest bit of good. Nothing short of a thermo-nuclear blast would get through that door if we didn't want them to. They threw their weight against it and there were some big boys there, but they were wasting their time. After a while, someone turned up with the battering ram.

An interested crowd began to gather.

Soon afterwards, reinforcements turned up. You could see they didn't take it very seriously. The wandered around the pod, kicking the walls and laughing. It was just five fugitives in a small hut, for crying out loud. Come on, centurion, get that door down and we can all go back to the mess.

The attentive crowd shouted instructions and helpful advice.

We made some tea and Peterson handed the mugs around. 'I have to ask,' he said to Markham. 'How did you spot what was going on?'

Markham, unexpectedly, said nothing.

Guthrie put down his mug. 'Well, I'll tell you, since he won't.'

I looked from one to the other. What was this all about?

He continued. 'It's what we do. While you're caught up in the moment – and no criticism; you're historians and you don't see the world in the same way as normal people – anyway, while you're caught up in the moment, we watch what else is going on. We keep you safe. It's our job. Markham saw a movement where there shouldn't have been movement and he acted. Because it's his job and he's very good at it.'

I looked at Markham and saw him – small, perpetually grubby, spiky hair, St Mary's favourite disaster-magnet, but he wasn't, was he? He was tough, competent, and virtually indestructible. I suddenly realised that if I couldn't have Guthrie then I'd rather have Markham watching my back than anyone else I knew.

And what of Guthrie himself? Quiet, assured, solid as a rock. Keeping us all safe.

I took a breath. 'We don't say this anything like often enough – but on behalf of everyone here – good job, guys. Thank you.'

There was a moment of intense embarrassment, but fortunately the soldiers chose that moment to clamber onto the roof to try and batter their way through, so we were able to keep calm and carry on.

We drank our tea and laughed at them. Our plan was to wait for them to give up and jump away under cover of darkness.

We didn't laugh for long because they didn't give up.

Their next idea was to smoke us out. They dragged up great piles of brushwood and timber – God knows where from – doused it with oil, and set it alight.

Pods are built to withstand a great deal of punishment and I should know. I nearly melted one, once. However, solid and robust as they may be, there's some delicate stuff inside. I wasn't sure how it would respond to being engulfed in a fireball. And what on earth would I tell Leon? It's possible I might have a bit of a reputation for damaging pods and this wouldn't help.

The interior of the pod grew very hot. A couple of red lights flickered. I instructed Peterson to shut down non-essential systems.

We sat in near darkness and listened to them bringing up more firewood. There were five of us in a small space and things began to get stuffy.

'This is no good,' said Guthrie, grimly. 'We're going to have to jump soon.'

'We can't,' said Van Owen. 'They're too close. This is why everyone stands behind the safety line in Hawking. So we don't inadvertently suck anyone into the vacuum.'

'Ah,' said Markham in tones of enlightenment. 'Is that's what it's for? You'd think a far-seeing technical department would have fitted

us with something to give the buggers some sort of electric shock, wouldn't you?'

There was a thoughtful pause and then Peterson said, 'Actually ...' and rummaged in a locker. 'I've had a brilliant idea.'

This was met with caution. Some of our brilliant ideas – aren't.

He pulled out a disk.

'Voila! The Sonic Scream.'

Van Owen and I stared at each other, baffled. Sweat ran down my back. I wiped my forehead on my palla.

'The what?'

'The Sonic Scream. Something Chief Farrell is putting together. Still experimental, of course.'

Silence.

'Look. You've heard of that sonic device? The one that only affects teenagers?'

'What are you talking about?' said Van Owen. Teenagers are inarticulate, acne-ridden lumps of inert matter. The only way you can ever induce movement is by trying to separate one from its mobile phone. And if you can do that then the only way you can stop it attacking is with rhinoceros tranquiliser.'

Harsh words from someone who only ceased being a teenager herself a few years ago.

'No, no,' he said, hastily. 'You broadcast at low frequency and only they can hear it. Normal people aren't affected. It induces feelings of discomfort. And they're teenagers, so they're pretty uncomfortable already. They don't like it, so they move on. We have something similar here. Not low frequency, obviously, but the same sort of thing. I think Chief Farrell thought it might be useful for hostile animals and suchlike, but it might shift this lot.'

I shook my head. 'I really don't think broadcasting screams will make this lot go away. Half of Rome will turn up to see what's going on.'

'No, that's the beauty of it. Nothing is actually audible. They'll just feel a bit odd – and then, without knowing why, they'll just go away.'

'Just like that? These soldiers conquered Gaul. And fought in Egypt. And Spain. You're saying these battle-scarred veterans will feel a slight headache coming on and just wander off?'

'Pretty much. And it's painless. Probably. If it works on aurochs and mammoths and ostriches, it's bound to work on Roman soldiers.'

'Ostriches?' said Guthrie, incredulously.

'Long story.'

'If you're going to give it a go,' interrupted Van Owen, who hadn't taken her eyes off the screen, 'you should get a move on. They're coming down the street with chains and half a dozen oxen. I think

we're about to be towed.'

Well, that wasn't good. Obviously, they were fed up and had decided not to waste any more time. They were just going to drag us away. Pods are tough – and I should know after what historians have done to them over the years – but bumping us up and down the Seven Hills of Rome? We needed to get out of here.

'Go ahead,' I said to Peterson. After all, it probably wouldn't even work.

He slapped in the disk and switched to audio.

It was embarrassing.

It was a disaster.

You can add Ancient Rome to the long list of places we can never go back to.

Inside the pod, of course, nothing happened.

Outside ... Outside ...

Words failed me.

When oxen stampede, they really don't mess about. Over the millennia, herds of bison have thundered majestically across the prairies, shaking the ground with the fury of their hooves. Six maddened oxen in a small Roman suburb channelled their ancestors and did even better.

The first casualty was a fruit and veg barrow. Two seconds later, we had vegetable puree and a lot of firewood. The owner sought refuge in a fig tree. Since he was only about four feet off the ground, it was hard to see what this would achieve, but this was advanced thinking for oxen and they lost interest.

All the Roman soldiers now scrambled up onto the roof – partly to escape the excited livestock and partly to get a better view. People in the square clutched their heads and then scattered as the oxen broke ranks and embarked on the bovine equivalent of asymmetric warfare.

Personally, I thought the fleeing hordes did more damage than the bullocks. The soldiers, shouting a variety of conflicting instructions and curses from the safety of the roof, also contributed more than their fair share to the confusion and disorder. Really, none of it was our fault.

There was only one exit from the square and with the exception of the man up the tree and the soldiers on the roof, everyone and everything headed in that direction. There was a massive bottleneck. Fights broke out. Women screamed. Soldiers shouted. Oxen bellowed.

We sipped our tea and watched the screen in awe.

Twenty minutes later, the square was deserted apart from a few disoriented souls who were rebounding from wall to wall as they attempted to find their way home.

Trampled vegetables lay in the gutters. The remains of market barrows and their goods were scattered over a surprisingly large area. The street was littered with odd sandals, discarded togas, several broken handcarts, abandoned shopping, and surely far more dung than was possible from only six oxen. Every dog in Rome was still howling its head off. The purveyor of quality groceries was still up the tree and had been joined by large numbers of chickens and a stray goat. Markham wanted to go and help him down, but was restrained by Major Guthrie, who was staring at the screen as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

'Not our fault,' I said, defensively.

He closed his eyes, briefly.

'Relax. No one's ever going to know,' said Peterson. Wrongly.

One by one, the soldiers dropped off the roof.

'It's raining men,' said Van Owen, which was something I'd always wanted to say.

Wrapping their cloaks around their heads, they went for more reinforcements.

'We could sell this device to Asterix,' said Markham, the only one who appeared unaffected by Sonic Scream Trauma.

'Can we just go?' said Guthrie, between gritted teeth.

So we went.

It was one of Peterson's better landings. We hardly bumped at all.

'Rather in the manner of a stone skimming effortlessly across a limpid pool,' he said.

What anyone would have said to that was never known because at this point it became apparent that our problems were not yet over.

All around Hawking, orange techies began to drop to the ground, arms curled protectively around their heads.

In the far corners of the hangar, the glass in both the IT and technical offices crazed suddenly, shattered, and fell to the ground.

'Shit!' said Peterson. 'Did we do that?'

'You forgot to switch off the bloody Sonic Scream thing,' I shouted. 'Quick.'

Peterson flicked a few switches and although nothing happened inside, outside the pod prone orange figures slowly began to unfurl.

'Like flowers at the beginning of a new day,' I said, trying to look on the bright side and getting the look from Guthrie that I deserved.

'All this is your fault,' said Guthrie to Markham. 'If you'd kept your bosoms where they belonged, none of this would have happened. I hold you entirely responsible.'

Markham blinked, indignantly. 'Not my fault if I have unreliable bosoms. I've got nice bleached nipples, though. Do you want to see?'

‘No!’ shouted four voices, simultaneously.

Round the hangar, people started to pick themselves up.

Polly Perkins, head of IT and a sweet girl, was being forcibly restrained by members of her team.

Dieter, Chief Farrell’s number two and built like a large brick shithouse, picked himself up, staggered a little, and then headed wrathfully for our pod. I had a moment of déjà vu. It was the oxen all over again. He picked up a fire bucket and hurled it with great accuracy and not a little force. It bounced off the pod with a dull thud.

We all stepped back.

‘I don’t actually care if I have to spend the rest of my life in here,’ said Van Owen. ‘I am never leaving this pod again.’

I heard Leon’s voice over the com link.

‘What’s going on in there?’

‘I’m carrying out a complete systems check,’ said Peterson, swiftly. ‘Going to be some time, I’m afraid.’

‘And I’m checking the inventory,’ I said. ‘Don’t wait up.’

There was a pause and then he said, ‘You have five seconds. Get your arses out here. Now.’

We sent Van Owen out first, because she has huge pansy-purple eyes and you’d have to be a monster to yell at her, closely followed by me because I was covered in snake goo and people might feel sorry for me.

Dr Bairstow, crunching his way across the glass fragments with magnificent disdain, met us just outside the pod.

‘Dr Maxwell. Are you injured?’

‘Snake blood, sir. But good news, Cleopatra is still alive.’

‘Should she be otherwise?’

‘An attempted murder, sir, magnificently foiled by St Mary’s in general and by Major Guthrie and Mr Markham in particular.

I beckoned them forwards. They shuffled sideways instead.

‘I’m almost certain the assignment was simply to observe and document. I distinctly remember saying so.’

‘Indeed you did, sir, but you know us. Always ready to go that extra mile.’

‘If you only knew how often I pray that some of you would go those extra miles.’

I was unsure how to respond to that one and compromised by scrubbing uselessly at my snake goo.

‘Good news,’ said Peterson, cheerfully. ‘The Sonic Scream thing seems to work.’

‘While I am certain the technical section rejoices in that knowledge,’ said Dr Bairstow, ‘I suspect that thought is not

uppermost in their minds at this moment. They appear to be anxious to discuss recent events with you. Should any of you survive, I look forward to reading your inadequate excuses for returning from your assignment in such an unexpectedly destructive manner.'

He turned and limped away.

The technical section closed in for the kill.

'I blame Markham,' said Peterson, much later. We were in the bar, settling our nerves.

Markham, who had been eyeing Nurse Hunter in his usual besotted fashion, sat up indignantly, although I can't think why. It can't have been the first time he'd heard those words uttered.

'What baffles me,' I said, in an attempt to head the argument off at the pass, 'is why no one ever said how ugly she was. Cleopatra, I mean. You could have launched ships off that nose.'

'Maybe,' said Van Owen, 'they just didn't want to admit their leading men fell for a woman who looked like a camel.'

We nodded wisely.

'Am I right in thinking we did A Good Thing there?' asked Guthrie. 'I'm assuming no one was supposed to die today. Except us, of course, and that happens so frequently, I've stopped worrying about it.'

We nodded again, each of us running through the implications in our minds. Of course, if it hadn't been us, someone else might easily have spotted the asps amongst the figs. But if they hadn't ... If one or both of them had died ... It really didn't bear thinking about. Guthrie was right – just for once, we'd done a Really Good Thing today.

Mrs Partridge appeared in the doorway, an ominously large number of 'Deductions from Wages for Damages Incurred' forms in her hand.

Markham groaned. A doomed attempt to reproduce Native American smoke signals had resulted in an unexpectedly large conflagration, the destruction of a small copse, the incineration of a surprisingly large number of blankets, and a letter of protest from the parish council. These days, very little of his wages remained for damages incurred to be deducted from. Any day now, he would be paying Dr Bairstow.

And behind Mrs Partridge loomed a very large and still very irate Dieter.

We resisted the temptation to huddle together for mutual reassurance.

'Well, I'll be OK,' I said, reaching for my drink. 'I'm Chief Operations Officer. I outrank him.'

'And I'm Chief Training Officer,' said Peterson. 'No problem here.'

'I'm Head of Security,' said Guthrie. 'I'm safe.'

‘I’m a girl,’ said Van Owen, fluttering her eyelashes.
We all stared at Mr Markham.
‘You utter bastards,’ he said.

THE END

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